

LOW COST COW/CALF PRODUCTION

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Individualists Unite

The School is about using the highest quality forage to condition the cow just prior to calving. The School is about calving close to the longest day of the year in order for photoperiod to impact and shorten the postpartum interval. Those of you who have adopted these principles stand alone in your area or region. Your neighbors derisively remark, "What in the hell are you doing?" On a couple of occasions, the banker contemplated pulling out because of your craziness. You also are aware of the response we get when we speak about the Low Cost Cow/Calf Program. It won't work! **That may all change.**

Hats Off To Nebraska

Reports¹ on nutrition, reproduction and economics are beginning to filter into the literature from Nebraska's "summer" calving program. They initiated the herd (130 cows) in 1993 at the 12,817 acre Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory near North Platte (41° 8'). Comparisons were made with a 400 head "spring" calving herd. The latter herd calves from March 18 to April 18. Calving dates for the summer calving herd have shifted from commencing June 8 to June 15 for 60 days. Currently, it appears that calving commences June 18 for a 50-day period. The longest day during spring calving is the final day and is 13:15:26 long. For the summer calves, it is June 21 and is 14:58:34 long (using North Platte latitude).

Any Differences?

You bet! Big time! The report consisted of averages of observations made in years '94, '95 and '96. What caught my eye was the hay. The summer-calving cows were fed 30 lb/cow/year while the spring-calving cows received a yearly average of 3,182 lb. Hay was fed to the summer herd only when snow covered the forage. Other differences are shown in the table below. Calf birth weights were about 6 lb heavier for the summer-calving herd. The authors point out that, although the birth weights

were heavier for the summer calves, there was less dystocia than with the spring-calving cows. Note in the table that the summer calves were weaned at two different times. While weaning weights were

	Spring	Summer	
Ave birth date	31-Mar	1-Jul	28-Jun
Birth wt, lb	90.0	96.4	95.8
Weaning date	10-Oct	1-Nov	10-Jan
Weaning wt, lb	471.0	369.8	435.8

less for the summer calves, the January weaned calves were 66 lb heavier than their sisters and brothers weaned in November. Similar quantities of a Protein supplement were fed to both herds each year. The summer herd received 131 lb/cow and the spring herd 108 lb/cow. I'm certain the researchers were concerned with the level of lactation and calf performance.

Pasturage

A number of ranches in the Sandhills of Nebraska are blessed with sub-irrigated meadows, along with native range. The researchers were concerned with the performance of the lactating summer herd through the September-October breeding season. The summer herd was divided, with half going to the sub-irrigated meadow and the remaining to native range. As the following table shows, performance

Effect of pasture on cow body wt and BCS during Sep-Oct breeding.			
Treatment	Year	Cow wt change	BCS change
Native	1994	-10.8	-0.14
Native	1995	-23.0	-0.90
Native	1996	-27.2	+0.07
Meadow	1994	+45.5	+0.09
Meadow	1995	+10.7	-0.39
Meadow	1996	+97.1	+0.08

was much better on the subirrigated meadow pastures. Performance on the native pasture, however, was not all that bad. *When interpreting live body weights, keep in mind that gut fill will be different with each forage. Changes in BCS may be more indicative of the true picture.* Change in BCS was slight except for 1995 when 24 in. of snow fell during the breeding season. Calves nursing cows that were pastured in the meadows gained more than

the calves with mothers on the native range during the 60-day breeding season. This is

Effect of pasture on calf gain and conception.		
	Meadow	Native
Calf gain, lb	143.6	127.6
Pregnancy rate, %	91.6	94.9

shown in the next table. Pregnancy rate was about 3% higher for the cows grazing native range. While this seems significant (dollar-wise) to me, the authors said it was not statistically different. This means that there was quite a bit of variation from year to year and from pasture to pasture.

Fallout

Skeptics abound. Already there are published comments from Oklahoma State University that summer calving may work in Nebraska but it is questionable for OK. According to them, it may be too hot during the breeding season.

Rumors

"Your low-cost approach to cow/calf operations is perfect for retaining calves into the next season." Thank you, Chris & Ted Slanker, Texas.

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¹ Lardy, G., D. Adams, D. Clark, T. Klopfenstein, J. Johnson and A. Applegarth. Spring versus summer calving for the Nebraska Sandhills: production characteristics. 1998 Nebraska Beef Report. pp 3-5.